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ABSTRACT

Preschool children's fantasy views of their fathers who had left home before the children were 3 years of age were investigated by trained observers during three separate 20-minute doll play sessions conducted within 12 consecutive school days. Ninety-six pairs of black, white, and hispanic mothers and children ranging in age from 5 to approximately 6.5 years participated in the study. Observers recorded each child's doll play responses on precoded record sheets. Independent variables considered in the study were child's age at father's departure, gender, quantity of contact, ethnicity, and maternal attitudes toward the nonresident father. A total of 18,846 fantasies were produced by the children and nearly 46 per cent included the absent father, while the present mother was included in 43 per cent of the fantasies. All of the children's father fantasies were categorized into "good," "bad" and "silhouette" fantasies. The "good" father fantasies, signifying affectionate, heroic, sexual, happy interactions with the father doll, accounted for 21 per cent of the father fantasies and were significantly associated with the maternal attitude variable. "Bad" fantasies, signifying aggressive, authoritarian, withdrawing, and sad interactions with the father doll were relatively few in number (8.6 per cent) and could be accounted for by several variables of which gender was the most important. The high proportion of "silhouette" fantasies, signifying passive, stereotyped, and unimaginitive doll interactions, (15.1 per cent) suggests that such fantasies, being relatively free from strong emotion and personal conflict, comprise an important element in the children's play. Conclusions drawn from the results are discussed. (Author/RH)

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Summary of a Study of Father Fantasies of Preschool Children With Nonresident Fathers

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The growth of the single parent family is noticable to all who work with families, women and children. Between 1970 and 1979, the number of one parent families increased by 79%, and now constitute at least 19% of all families with children under 18 years of age. Single parent mothers maintain 17% of the one parent families as compared to single parent fathers who maintain only about 2% of these families. While the percentage of widowed single parent women decreased from 1970 to 1979, the percentage of divorced, separated or never married single parent mothers increased by 134%, 63% and 286% respectively. Divorced, separated or never married women now constitute 75% of single parent mothers ("Household and family characteristics", 1980).

In my work with single parent women specific concerns and feelings consistently arise whether single parenthood has been assumed by choice or circumstance. The questions asked only hint at the complexity of the situation facing the parents and children in the single parent family. Most of the questions can be divided into three major categories. There are questions which relate to practical and reality issues concerning child care, career and financial considerations, and legal matters. Secondly, there are questions which pertain to feelings such as anger and frustration, guilt and blame, fear, loss of self esteem, disappointment in failed love, self entitlement, hope and anticipation. Thirdly, there are those questions which

specifically relate to the child. These questions most frequently include concerns about homosexuality, discipline and worries about the child's adjustment particularly in later interpersonal relationships. One of the most frequent questions which I am asked is "How come Johnny thinks his father is so great?" This question is usually accompanied by strong feelings of anger and frustration, envy and being unappreciated. It was this question, on behalf of the single parent mothers with whom I worked, that precipitated a research study which asked the question "How do preschool children with nonresident fathers view the father?"

The focus in the study was upon paternal absence in situations of divorce, permanent separation or abandonment rather than death because of the growing number of preschool children living without fathers in the home due to these circumstances. The study considered the variables of (a) age of the child when father left home, (b) gender, (c) race of the child, (d) quantity of father contact following his departure from the home and (e) maternal attitude towards the nonresident father. Specifically, the study investigated the fantasy view of father of five and six year old children whose fathers left home before the children were three years of age. Doll play was chosen as the most appropriate measure of the child's view of father in this study since the use of fantasy play with the particular population under investigation satisfactorily accommodated for the limitations and variance in expressive abilities found among preschool children. Furthermore, it explored a vital coping device employed by young children for reality adaptive and/or defensive purposes. In addition, it considered the

children's thoughts and fantasies about who and what father is and could be to them rather than their knowledge about the nonresident father. For example, a youngster might know that his parents fought alot and that his father was rough and had to leave. The child might also feel and fantasize that father is gentle, kind and desirable. The use of doll play also permits us to consider the issue of the non-resident father which may be laden with emotionality and may potentially stimulate anxiety in the children and mothers in a relatively nonanxiety provoking manner.

Children were eligible to participate in the project on the basis of their mother's responses to questionnaires in regard to demographic information, feelings about the nonresident father, feelings about men in general, and confirmation from the preschool that the information concerning father's nonresidency was correct. All information regarding the nonresident fathers was obtained from the mothers. All of the children and mothers were volunteers. The children were observed by trained observers during three separate twenty minute doll play sessions within 12 consecutive school days with at least one day between each session. The observers recorded the child's doll play responses on precoded record sheets. Interactions between the experimenter and child before, during and after the play sessions were standardized according to a Scoring and Instruction Manual adapted from those used in previous doll play studies by Bach in 1945 and 1946.

Ninety-six pairs of black, white and hispanic mothers and children participated in the study. The children ranged in age from 5.0 to 6.4 years. A profile of the average child in the study is as follows: The child is a white, black or hispanic youngster of 5 years 5 months who is in full-time attendence at a New York City

publically funded preschool program. He/she lives with a mother about 30 years of age with no brothers, sisters or adult men living in the household. Four years have elapsed since the nonresident father left the household, at which time the child was just past one year old. At present, contact between the nonresident father and child is slightly more than 1 to 12 days per year. If the parents of the child's mother were separated, the mother experienced parental separation at a later age than did her own child. This general picture reflects the contemporary social situation, that is, more single parent families with one child and with younger children than in the past.

The children in the study produced 18,846 fantasies. Of these, approximately 46% included father and represented the father fantasies. Mother was included in 43% of the fantasies. These findings indicate that preschool children with nonresident fathers have a great number of fantasies about father. In fact, they have as many fantasies about father as they have about mother. Even if father is physically absent, the symbolic image occupies much psychological space and time. These findings dispel notions that once father is out of sight, he is out of mind. They substantiate clinical impressions that even if physically absent, father is very much on the minds on his children (Freud & Burlingham, 1973).

All of the children's father fantasies were categorized into "good", "bad" and "silhouette" fantasies. The "good" father fantasies accounted for 21% of the father fantasies and reflect affectionate, heroic, sexual and happy interactions with the father doll. The "bad" father fantasies consist of doll dramatizations which are aggressive, authoritarian, withdrawing, sad or depressed in feeling tone and accounted for 8.6% of the

fantasies about father. The "silhouette" father fantasies signify doll action which is passive, stereotyped and unimaginative and accounted for 15.1% of the responses.

Preschool children with nonresident fathers have more "good" fantasies about father than any other kind. "Good" father fantasies are equally important to boys and girls in the development of the nonresident father-child relationship. Of the variables considered in the study (age at father's departure, gender, quantity of contact, ethnicity and maternal attitude towards the nonresident father), only maternal attitude was significantly ($p < .05$) related to "good" father fantasies. As mothers feel more positive towards the nonresident fathers, the children have more "good" father fantasies. Children have fewer "good" father fantasies when their mothers feel more negatively towards the nonresident fathers. Most "good" father fantasies were affectionate and sexual in nature. Boys and girls imagined father as an equally romantic figure who arouses sexual curiousity as well as nurturing and caretaking thoughts. Father is much less often seen as a playful, supportive, highly esteemed heroic protector. The preponderance of affectionate and sexual father fantasies of the children in this study can be seen as reflecting age appropriate concentration upon sexual exploration and identification issues since fantasies are believed to reflect the inner life and concerns of the child (Gould, 1972). The comparatively fewer heroic, instructive and playful fantasies for both boys and girls suggest that the "good" fantasy father they create is rooted in early attachment images which find satisfaction in nurturing and caretaking activities rather than in later, more admiring, powerful ones which help instill feelings of self assertion, competence and pride. Among the participants in this study, the "good" father is imagined from the perspective of a child still in the early stage of the father-

child relationship (coinciding with the one to three year period during which father left home) rather than from the perspective expected of five and six year old children. For the preschool children in this study, father can also be seen to possess qualities similar to those associated with mothering and confirm the view of mother or the activities associated with mothering as the center of life for these young children.

"Bad" fantasies about father were relatively few in number (8.6%) and can be accounted for by several variables of which gender is the most important. Although boys had more "bad" father fantasies than girls, the fantasy father for preschool children of both sexes with nonresident fathers is only a mildly "bad" figure who is rarely authoritative or hostile towards his children. He infrequently initiates angry, cruel or demanding action. Most "bad" father fantasies were in the hurt and injury and hiding and escaping subcategories which are thematically concerned with harm, departure and disappearance. These concerns are shared equally by boys and girls. Concentration on hiding and escaping themes, the limited quantity of "bad" father fantasies (as compared to "good"), and the resistance of "bad" father fantasies to the maternal attitude towards the nonresident father emphasize the prevalence of thoughts concerned with father's nonresidency and the wish to maintain father as a "good" rather than a "bad" figure. It is believed that the child uses fantasy to help him/her comprehend father's departure, separation and nonresidency, and to express his/her wish to reclaim father as a "good" figure who is consistently present in one's life. In this way the child can at least use the fantasy father in the continued movement away from mother towards greater ego autonomy.

"Silhouette" father fantasies are statistically unrelated to the variables considered in this study. The

high proportion of "silhouette" father fantasies (15.1%) suggests that such fantasies comprise an important element in the children's play. They seem to provide the child with a safe retreat from either "good" or "bad" fantasies in that "silhouette" fantasies are neutral and relatively free from strong emotion, deep personal feelings and conflict.

The results of this study lead to several conclusions concerning the father fantasies of preschool children with nonresident fathers and the nature of the nonresident father-child relationship. Preschool children with nonresident fathers have a great interest, concern and preoccupation with the concept of father. Boys have more "bad" fantasies about father than girls. This difference between the sexes parallels that found in the general body of literature and research concerning sex differences in doll play for all children and is therefore not to be considered unusual or deviant. Mother's ability to interpret the nonresident father to her child is important, but limited. Her attitude can encourage or discourage the child's preceptions of the "good" aspects of father in fantasy. However, the child's view of the "bad" father in fantasy is independent of and resistent to variations in the maternal attitutde towards the nonresident father.

Black, white and hispanic preschool children with nonresident fathers maintain an idealized version of father in fantasy. In fantasy, father is narrowly defined as a "good" person who is sexual and affectionate but who does not incorporate the broader features of "good" and "bad". Father is not a thrilling or exciting man to be admired, nor a threatening individual to be feared. He is rarely bossy, harsh, punitive or hurtful towards his children. Instead, father emerges in fantasy as either a nurturing and desired adult or as one whose

presence is definite even though his actions may be passive and stereotyped. The specific qualities associated with attachment to father in fantasy suggest that aspects of the nonresident father-child relationship may remain in the early phase of development during which the father is a trusted and inviting person whose role is still vague but promising. This then poses a potential interference in future development since it can diminish resources, derived from a more realistic and mature view of father, which are important in the child's integration of father into his/her concept of him/herself and others.

The children in the study also used doll play fantasies as a coping device in confronting the absence of father. Although he may not be present in reality, father remains "psychologically" alive, present and available through fantasy for use in the child's growth and development. Painful thoughts and negative feelings towards the nonresident father are often denied in fantasy by the preschool child with a nonresident father.

In summary, one would expect a preschool child of five or six years who lives with mother and is attending a full-time preschool program to fantasize a great deal about the nonresident father who left home within the first three years of the child's life. Children of both sexes have relatively few "bad" father fantasies, although boys may have more "bad" father fantasies than girls. In general, the fantasy father can be expected to be seen as an idealized person who is rarely thought of as "bad". This version of father can be expected to exist for white, black or hispanic children of both sexes regardless of variations in the date of father's departure from the home (as long as it occurred within the first three years of the child's life) or how often they see the nonresident father. The mother's

attitude towards the nonresident father can be expected to encourage or discourage the child's "good" father fantasies but not to encourage or discourage the "bad" father fantasies.

In light of the results of the study, it is not surprising to hear mothers voice their concerns, objections and envy in regard to their child's glorification of the nonresident father. Single parent mothers are responding to a response pattern which seems quite common in the preschool child with a nonresident father. It is important to recognize this reaction as part of the developmental pattern of preschool children with nonresident fathers and to question the meaning, purpose and role of the idealization of father in the child's future development and growth.

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